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NDEP says Cortez not polluting groundwater

By ADELLA HARDING - Staff Writer

ELKO - Cortez Gold Mines operations aren't impacting groundwater as alleged by two environmental organizations, according to a new report from the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection.

NDEP issued the finding in answer to a complaint that the infiltration process for water pumped from the Lander County mine was carrying leached salts into the groundwater.

"The drinking water is not threatened," said Dave Gaskin, chief of NDEP's Bureau of Mining Regulation and Reclamation.

NDEP's report shows, however, that there are elevated levels of salts and total dissolved solids in the mounding of water under infiltration basins, however.

Gaskin said water seeping into the basins "mobilizes natural occurring salts" so the mounds under the basins show elevated salts and total dissolved solids.

"But we regulate the groundwater table, not the mounds. The real compliance point is the groundwater table," he said.

Nicole Rinke of the Western Mining Action Project, which filed the complaint for Great Basin Mine Watch and the Western Shoshone Defense Project, disagrees with NDEP.

"It looks like NDEP is denying a problem. We think legally, hydrologically and technically there is a problem. I'm disappointed with the result," said Rinke, who works out of Reno.

Rinke said she had hoped to see NDEP find a way to redesign the basins or call for deeper rejection wells "so the basins wouldn't pick up the stuff that soaks in."

She also said Tuesday the organizations haven't decided whether to pursue the complaint. They had hoped to resolve the question "outside the legal system," by filing the complaint with NDEP, Rinke said.

"We're happy with the finding. It basically substantiates what we've been saying," said Jim Chavis, vice president of U.S. government relations for Placer Dome America, which operates Cortez.

Chavis said Cortez agrees there is elevated TDS in the mounding above the natural water table but has maintained all along there was no contamination of the groundwater.

"We're clearly pleased with the report and confirmation that there are no risks to any public drinking

water," said Bill Upton, director of sustainable development for Placer Dome America.

Cortez dewaterers roughly 20,000 gallons per minute to keep the mine dry. The water is discharged into infiltration basins on site and a portion is used in irrigation during the growing season at Cortez's nearby Dean Ranch.

The infiltration project includes up to 65 basins within 13 infiltration sites, and there are more than 70 monitoring wells, the NDEP report states.

Gaskin said there are so many monitoring wells at different levels that it is important to look at the depth of a well when checking groundwater quality.

He said the complaint alleged the infiltration process was causing a contaminant plume that is migrating offsite to impact drinking water users, but the review found that wasn't the case.

The lengthy NDEP report states, however, there were two former basin sites where there was contamination of the groundwater table, but these sites are closed and the groundwater isn't moving.

NDEP writes that the "affected groundwater is localized by low transmissivity soils with no apparent potential for migration that could adversely impact reasonable use of groundwater in the area."

Chavis said these two sites, called Filippini and Frome, have been closed for a number of years and reclaimed.

Although NDEP didn't find any groundwater problems, the review came up with a number of suggestions for both the agency and Cortez to improve monitoring of water quality.

For instance, the report said NDEP should revise monitoring requirements under the water pollution control permit to "clearly identify those wells that are utilized for groundwater quality compliance purposes."

NDEP also asks Cortez to install additional monitoring wells at six infiltration sites and install new monitoring wells at three sites and to remove piping from the Frome site so no water is discharged there in the future.

"We'll read their recommendations. We work pretty closely with NDEP," Chavis said.

Gaskin said NDEP did a "very thorough and exhaustive review. We really got no surprises."

Western Mining Action Project filed the complaint with NDEP last July.

-- CLOSE WINDOW --